

Conflict & Violence – 3

Sermon by Revd Deryck Collingwood on Lent 3

Over the last two weeks I have looked at two different responses to the presence of conflict and violence in the world: (i) the traditional means of justifying violent response to perceived evil and (ii) the tradition of Pacifism.

And I suggested that, even if one accepts the limited use of force to contain violence or its threat, the traditional Just War theory as such is perhaps now difficult to uphold, when weapons are widely indiscriminate in their effect and the response they make possible can be so disproportionate to the original injustice.

But the pacifist view has sometimes been put across as being too passive and is clearly not convincing to many people – typified in ‘turning the other cheek’ seeming too much like becoming a ‘doormat’, and many will argue it is wrong to simply stand by while others suffer, we should protect, and pacifism may encourage this.

Today I want to go back to the roots and ask what is at the heart of Jesus saying ‘Blessed are the Peacemakers’, and also of Paul’s insistence on our being bearers of a gospel of reconciliation. Two particular things:

First, the ‘peace’ Jesus was talking about, ‘Shalom’, takes us right back, in a sense, to the creation story. *Shalom* is not a static, passive concept; it is an active thing. It reaches out, driven by a *longing* for the fulfilment of a promise, the vision of the holy mountain we hear of in Isaiah, the restoration of the kingdom of God – a wholeness and wholesomeness of life for all, when God can look at all and say, ‘It is good!’

It is most certainly *not* some personal state of tranquillity; for *all* are to be gathered to God’s holy mountain and God’s Shalom is not possible without one’s sisters and brothers in Christ. So we are not talking ‘Nirvana’ here; we are not talking ‘escape’ from the world. We *are* talking about a longing that is inclusive and, like the shepherd leaving the ninety nine and going out to look for the one lost sheep, won’t rest until all are found and gathered in.

But, people will say, that vision of the holy mountain is all a bit unreal; that’s not the way the world works and we have to live in the real world.

But why does that vision remain so elusive? The biblical tradition is very clear, that it is *fear* that gets in the way; and that God’s love in Christ overcomes fear. But we are so slow to accept God’s love.

In his book ‘The Truce of God’, Rowan Williams speaks of our tendency to see the problems of the world as someone else’s problem, someone else’s fault. They’re not our responsibility. Yet that denial only plays into our need for fantasy, to escape from facing up to our innermost fears. It is much easier to project things onto someone else. We do so constantly as individuals and we do so as nations.

So the second thing is Christ’s gift. ‘My peace I give you...’ Peace is his *gift* to the disciples. Again, it is not promised as a nice cosy feeling or warm experience

between neighbours, or even between fellow Christians. But it *is* given. And immediately they are sent out into the world to carry it to others, whatever they 'feel'.

While the grand vision of the holy mountain may seem unreal, the gift of Christ's peace is nonetheless a real taste of fulfilment *now*. It is given to *counter* this tendency to blame others for the problems of the world and refuse to take responsibility ourselves; *counter* the fantasy that 'we're ok' which results in distancing

ourselves from others, seeing them as 'different', being willing to maintain the possibility of hostility with them.

When we wage war on Christians of other nations, we wage war on our own family. But more than that, when as Christians we wage war on any person of any faith or none, as a child of God, we wage war on our own family. And how many of us are comfortable with letting feuds within our own families spill over into bloodshed?

In this Gospel of reconciliation that we are given, Jesus' ministry begins in Mark's account with him saying, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the Good news!' *Penitence* comes first.

I referred the other week to a conference in Basel, the first gathering of all Europe's churches since the Reformation. That began with a call for Europe's nations and churches to repent for the hurt we have caused in the rest of the world over hundreds of years, particularly in building our wealth on the ill-gotten profits of colonialism and its continuing outwash in world debt and disempowerment. Penitence brings conversion of the heart and clears the path to walk forward together with our neighbours around the world.

But the Gospel call is also to follow, and that means getting hands dirty. We need to come down from the mount of Transfiguration with Christ onto the plain and be confronted by the chaos that reigns there and get stuck in, not run away.

There, Christ's way is a challenge to the ways of the world and he offers a genuine alternative in confronting people with truth without violence that, one day, will set them free. Look at Desmond Tutu's 'Truth and Reconciliation' work in South Africa. Gandhi was much influenced by the Sermon on the Mount; Martin Luther King was much influenced by Gandhi. Both demonstrated how powerful an alternative is the way of non-violent direct action, just as today ecumenical volunteers stand at check points and in olive groves in Palestine to challenge the current wave of intimidation and apartheid there.

But bringing truth to light, even through *non-violence*, can bring suffering that has to be accepted, and Jesus knew that 'sword' for himself and for his disciples too.

Some of you have read Elias Chacour's 'Blood Brothers, with its story of building the school at Ibillin in western Galilee which Israeli authorities had banned, despite this being within Israel rather than the West Bank; it was pure intimidation.

Wave after wave of volunteer workers were jailed, but the school was eventually completed with the assistance of international volunteers, who were not so easily

intimidated. Today it is not only a school, but a place of adult higher education too for all ethnic and religious groups together; Arab and Jew; Moslem, Christian and Jewish.

In the games hall they painted a large mural depicting the cross. It portrays scenes of reconstruction of lives where hands get very dirty. At the extremities of the arms of the cross are hands passing a light through prison bars, lighting a candle of hope on the other side. But the prison bars are not only those obvious ones of Palestinians locked up by the Israeli forces. We are all prisoners of our own misconceptions and prejudices; we all need liberation from our inner fears. The Gospel calls us to be bearers of the light of truth and to pass on the peace of Christ.

And this gift of Christ's peace is tested by a *longing* for it being for *all* God's people, not just some: do we long for the binding up of the broken, the unifying reconciliation of God? Or do we long for an escape from our pain, for something easier for ourselves?

Jesus says he came not to bring peace but a sword, or fire on earth. What does he mean? It's a symbolic sword of course, a fact of division – which is the reality of choosing him. The division is between those who choose to repent and those who do not; those who are willing to lose face in this world, and those who are not. And in the affairs of governance of this world, we have made it very difficult to be seen to lose face.

So Jesus is realistic about the ways of the world: that troubles and wars will always be around. He calls his disciples to witness to another way, a way of healing, salt to the wound. Salt stings, but it heals; calls us to be people of the beatitudes, which noticeably begin with the blessedness of the poor – who, he also says will always be around – and which end with the blessedness of God's children, the peacemakers, and the persecuted, who will possess the Kingdom.

The way of the 'world' is generally to measure ourselves against those who are *better* off than we are... which leads us to aspire to be like them: we always want something more, something better. The way of God, it appears, is rather to measure ourselves against those who are *least* well off, and the rest of the beatitudes and a Christian life of compassion and inclusion, flow from there.

And finally, Jesus gives to his disciples a prayer to keep their hearts focussed where they must be, if this journey is to have any hope of working out... centred in God. We get so used to saying the Lord's prayer that I wonder how much we really *pray* it. But it is a prayer of *longing*: *Your Kingdom come!* *Your will be done* on earth as in heaven...

Laying ourselves in dependency upon God each day for what we need; seeking forgiveness for who are as much as what we have done, we can only ultimately respond to situations of conflict rooted in prayer: lead us not into temptation (including our fantasies of who other people are); but deliver us from evil, lest we seek to deliver ourselves in the wrong way.

Purify our hearts and minds O God, and have mercy upon us when we go wrong; turn our hearts again to your ways and grant us to bear the yoke of obedience that you make light for us in Christ our Lord. Amen

Postscript:

On Lent 4, the Gospel is that of the 'Prodigal Son', which might be better referred to as that of the 'Lost Son(s)', or the 'Waiting and Extravagant / Prodigal Father'. *Both* the sons, the rebellious younger one who squanders everything *and* the self-righteous clean-living older one, displease the father; the elder one refuses to partake of his feast, an insult as significant as the younger insisting on taking his share of the inheritance while his father still lives. But the father's love goes out to both of them, apparent sinner and righteous one alike.

That seems the most fitting follow-up to our journey through conflict. The younger brother represents those who want to break free of tradition and be left free to work things out for themselves; the older one represents those who insist on sticking by the rules and staying in control. So much conflict is borne of the friction between these two ways in every generation.

In the end of the day, the Christian calling is simply to accept the Father's love and acceptance, and 'obey' in response to the invitation to 'come in', even in the company of those we might otherwise tend to despise. To disobey and refuse to enter the feast is as 'sinful' in these terms as running off and squandering the inheritance, but the elder brother cannot see that.

So I simply ask, 'How do we hope to find that depth of conversion to the call of Christ that we can recognise ourselves as older or younger brothers/sisters in that story and be prepared to live alongside one another *despite* history and former behaviours?'

And, 'How do we so take our baptismal calling to heart that we are not only clothed outwardly in Christ but re-kindle with a 'heart of flesh' that reflects his compassion?' For if we seek (nay, *long*) to live a life in his Peace, as ministers of his reconciliation, we will not see Peace brought about by us talking about it; only by *living* it. There are plenty who are willing to shout for peace but whose hearts and minds are not at peace and who lead anything but peaceable lives. Christ's call is to enter into his Kingdom...

What does that mean for us as individuals and as a community?

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